



## Writing for Scholarships & College Admission

Writing personal statements for scholarships and college applications is a lot like writing a resume: you have to demonstrate that you understand the requirements of the evaluating committee and are uniquely qualified, and you have to do it concisely, clearly, and persuasively.

### Read directions/prompts attentively

Start by reading the writing prompt closely. Prompts ask you for specific things, and you should respond to each. Brainstorm your responses to the following common prompts:

- What are your personal and academic achievements?
- What are your academic plans?
- What are your career goals?
- How did you become interested in your major or career?
- What are your extracurricular activities?
- What contributions have you made to your community?
- What personal characteristics do you bring—your strengths AND weaknesses?
- What obstacles have you overcome, especially in your education?
- How will your unique qualities contribute to this institution?

Think about your audience as you write. They will read many of these responses, so don't go over the word limit. Try to make yourself stand out; avoid generalities like "achieve my goals in life." (Yawn.) Remember that the people who read your application may not know a lot about your major or career choice, so avoid highly specialized language. You may be trying to impress, but you may instead confuse or annoy them. Don't give them an excuse to set aside your application early.

### Tell your story

The personal statement required for Yuba College Foundation Scholarships, for example, asks you for the following, typed, and not more than two pages long:

Required information	For example...
Personal and academic achievements	Taught myself sign language; traveled Europe alone at age 15; graduated high school a year early; first in my family to attend college
Academic plans and career goals	BS in Psychology; MA in Education; work with foster youth; be a high school principal
Extracurricular activities	Run 10Ks, restore old cars; tutor math
Contributions to the community	Volunteer at the library; coach a youth soccer team
Why you are a good candidate for a scholarship	I will not waste the privilege; I will give back to the community by volunteering

Achievements are things you have accomplished *with effort*. Choose achievements that make you proud, even if you don't think they are as good as someone else's. Ask yourself: What achievement makes me proud? Explain *why* you are proud.

Academic plans and career goals can change. Even if you are not 100 percent certain of yours, do your best to map out one coherent plan. No one will try to hold you to it later if you change your mind.

Choose extracurricular activities that show that you do more than sit around putting in screen time on your phone, things that involve you with others face-to-face. (If you don't do things like that, start doing them.) Ask yourself: What do I do that is positive, active, holds my interest, and demands a certain level of commitment, knowledge or skill?

You may not be a volunteer in a structured program, but you may still contribute to the community. Do you supervise younger brothers and sisters while your parents work? That is a positive contribution to your family and to the community. Do you help your elderly neighbor take out the trash weekly? That is a positive contribution to your neighborhood and to the community. Ask yourself: what do I do consistently (perhaps without pay) that has positive effects on those around me?

Administrators of scholarship funds and college admissions committees are interested in giving you an opportunity to succeed. But they also want to know that their candidates will reflect well on *them*—eventually your success is aggregated into the success of the university; your career success becomes part of the success of the scholarship fund that helped you achieve it. Offer them something to brag about.

### **Omit some things...**

Omit things that make you appear insulated and disengaged from a wider community (like, "My hobby is watching late night sitcoms alone in my room"). But many solitary activities actually DO connect to a wider community of aficionados—for example, if you restore old cars, you are probably part of a wider community of old-car enthusiasts and maintain standards of restoration that come from that community. You may read restoration magazines, bookmark restoration websites, and engage in online conversations. Or, if you sit alone in your room and create and publish video blogs that critique action movies, you are interacting with a large virtual audience, anticipating and responding to their comments, questions, and reactions. Ask yourself: which of my interests and activities actively involve me in a larger community of like-minded people?

Omit physical traits like height, weight, and complexion. Omit health issues unless they pertain specifically to obstacles you have overcome. Omit anything personal that doesn't directly and specifically support the questions you are being asked. Ask yourself: does this clearly support a point I am trying to make?

Omit random complaints about teachers, family members, society, or your life in general.

However, if your academic record shows unexplained gaps, don't omit an explanation. For instance, if you attended college for year and then came back three years later, you might want to account for the gap ("I got married and had twin boys" or "I relocated to Nome, Alaska, with my husband and have only recently returned," or "I had to take a full-time job when my dad died to help support my family"). Similarly, if your grade record shows sudden changes (like your GPA dropping from 3.7 to 1.8), you might need to explain ("I left school to take a full-time job but never formally dropped my classes").

### **Tell who you are: your strengths and weaknesses**

Tell what makes you unique. Tell what motivates you and what your values are. Tell where you came from and how your character was formed. Tell what sets you apart from other people. Don't misrepresent yourself, but try to spin your weaknesses into strengths or phrase them in such a way that

the readers want to forgive you and take a chance on you (“I get so focused on my work that my social life suffers”).

Here are some examples of strengths that might matter to a scholarship or college application committee and weaknesses that could be read as hidden strengths:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I learn new things quickly.</li> <li>• I am curious.</li> <li>• I can work effectively in groups.</li> <li>• I am an independent learner.</li> <li>• I am self-motivated.</li> <li>• I am determined and persistent.</li> <li>• I encourage others to do their best.</li> <li>• I understand the struggles other people have.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I get so excited I jump right into a task without reading directions.</li> <li>• Once I understand what to do, I sometimes leave others behind.</li> <li>• I sometimes get discouraged when everyone isn't contributing to a project.</li> <li>• I tend to take on too much of the work.</li> <li>• I get sidetracked listening to people and trying to help them solve their problems.</li> </ul>

### Ask for recommendations

You might be asked to provide one or more letters of recommendation, sometimes submitted electronically. Don't ask your family members and friends—instructors and employers are a good source of recommendations if you have a good (and recent) relationship with them.

Plan ahead to ask for instructor recommendations. Most instructors take your request seriously and try to write individual letters crafted just for you. At the same time, they have obligations in addition to their classes and little free time. They cannot write you a recommendation on the spot, or the day before you need it, or even, sometimes, within the week. Ask as far ahead as you can, and give the instructor as much information as you can to make the process easier:

- Your name (!), which class you took, which semester you took it, and what grade you earned
- Any outstanding work you did in the class that you want mentioned
- Your intended major and specific career plans
- The name and type of scholarship (or college) you are applying for
- Characteristics and personal qualities you think the selection committee will look for (e.g., teamwork and collaboration? Hard work and persistence?)

## Brainstorming Worksheet Writing for Scholarships & College Admission

### Personal and academic achievements

Make a list of personal and academic achievements, but only choose your strongest one to write about.

What did I achieve?	When? How?	Why am I proud of this?

### Academic plans and career goals

Even if you haven't settled on a career goal yet, map one out. No one will care if you change your mind.

What major? What degree? What school?	What steps will you have to take?	How long will it take?
What industry? What job title?	Who besides yourself will benefit from your career choice?	What personal satisfaction will you gain from this career?

### Extracurricular activities

List some things you do outside of work and school that demonstrate your best character traits. Select only one or two to write about.

What do I like to do and why?	What positive character traits does it show?					
	Physical stamina	Persistence	Enjoy a challenge	Mental focus	Socially engaged	Other?

### Contributions to the community

List some things you do consistently that have positive effects in the community. Then choose your strongest.

What I do	Where and when?	Who does it benefit?

### Obstacles you have overcome, especially in education

Think of which challenges or even failures you have successfully moved past in your education. List them, but choose one that best makes you look good: inventive, hard-working, persistent.

What was the obstacle?	How did I overcome it?	What does that say about me?

*Contributed by Rosemary McKeever*



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